

LET'S GET VISUAL

Ivanka Trump's
eponymous New
York City store

HOW PEOPLE FEEL IN
YOUR STORE DIRECTLY
CORRELATES TO YOUR
BOTTOM LINE
BY KRISTIN YOUNG



The spanking-new pop-art-filled Breitling boutique on New York City's 57th Street

When Swiss watchmaker Breitling took over a piece of real estate on 57th Street in New York City for its first-ever flagship, the challenge was to make it feel modern, yet warm and welcoming. The 4,500-square-foot space had drawbacks—at approximately 15 feet wide, it's narrow. To offset the closed-in feeling, Breitling architects graduated each of the three floors, cutting them back into lofts that open out into one cavernous space with soaring ceilings. It helped that a three-story façade of glass allows natural light to flood in. They avoided anything intimidating and pretentious, like security-lock double doors often used at jewelry boutiques, and used warm colors and natural materials, such as wood and whitewashed brick, throughout.

Nobody knows better than Breitling that a customer doesn't need to spend thousands of dollars on a watch. The seduction has to begin long before a customer crosses the threshold. "You need to attract people to come in," says Breitling vice president Sebastien Amstutz, who opened the flagship's doors in October. "For us the space almost has to be a piece of jewelry. Once people are in the store, they need to feel good. Then you can start talking about the brand."

As a nod to the brand's heritage—Breitling was founded in 1884 in the Swiss village of Saint-Imier and developed a reputation for producing pilot's

watches—iconic American pop art by artist Kevin Kelly depicting aviation scenes is placed throughout the store. On the second floor sits a life-size sculpture of a woman reminiscent of Rosie the Riveter straddling a missile. The art is not for sale, but the boutique will put you in touch with the artist. The store houses a complete assortment of 900 timepieces and takes customers on a journey from Breitling's past to its present—most of the second floor showcases historic pieces. Breitling executives declined to reveal figures, but it's clear to anybody who enters the store: The brand has spared no expense in its attempt to make you want to stay a while.

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In this economy, there is a tendency to rank visual merchandising somewhere between bathroom supplies and carpet cleaning—it's not an integral part of the business. However, many experts believe it is precisely in challenging times that visual merchandising should be a priority. Professionals are divided on how much of your budget you should allocate to sprucing up your space—10 percent was one number bandied about in interviews for this story—but all agree on this: If you haven't updated anything in the past five years, your business is suffering.

"There are many studies that measure how visual

merchandising impacts sales," says Linda Cahan, a veteran visual merchandiser who has authored two books on the subject: *Feng Shui for Retailers* and *100 Displays Under \$100*. "[Visual] merchandising encourages shoppers to linger over a product longer, increases the number of times they look at an item, and affects their willingness to spend more money."

Traditional elements like store signage and window displays are still key. Today, however, savvy merchandisers go to work on the subconscious of a customer at each point of contact, often beginning with a website. Themes—whether centered on a holiday, a product launch, or a brand identity—merge the online experience with a physical one. "The more cohesive that message is, the more successful it is in reaching customers," says Pam Levine, principal of New York City-based Levine Design Group.

Ralph Lauren is a master at delivering a seamless theme. At the brand's first fine watch and jewelry salon—inside a large flagship on Manhattan's Madison Avenue—plush camel carpeting is laid throughout, punctuated by black French polished paneling and ornate crystal chandeliers. There is also a custom antique silver desk and vitrines framed in antique silver inset with black crocodile prosceniums. Every decorative detail recalls the Polo Ralph Lauren equestrian theme, serving as an effective background for



Left: Stephen Webster's Rodeo Drive window, featuring a Zac Posen-clad mannequin; above: the equally eclectic interior of Webster's store



the designer's classic horse-and-stirrup motifs in diamonds, pavé chains, or romantic chandelier earrings.

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Not everyone has the financial wherewithal to turn out stores à la Ralph Lauren, but even the creatively challenged can trick out a window or two. Stuck on an idea? Cahan often advises her clients to collaborate with local artists and showcase their work in the windows. Look for artists who work with materials such as ceramic or wood that unexpectedly play off precious gems. The small scale of jewelry is limiting, but here's a good rule of thumb: If your store gets foot traffic, use small props; if your store gets drive-by traffic, oversized props work best. Most important, vary things often. "The secret to getting people to notice your window is to change your window," Cahan says. "The less often you change it, the more it will become wallpaper and people will stop looking."

F.D., opened by socialite Fiona Druckenmiller on Manhattan's Upper East Side in October, changes its windows every three weeks with the help of artist

Morne Ferreira. The boutique houses highly collectible, signed vintage jewelry from Cartier, Van Cleef & Arpels, Patek Philippe, and Harry Winston. But in February, the star of the display was a giant blue papier-mâché heart that paid homage to Valentine's Day. However modest it was, it was artistic, delightfully ironic, and evocative of the treasures within.

London-based jewelry designer Stephen Webster has a penchant for pairing his jewelry with unconventional props such as vinyl records, favorite books, or motorbike parts. But when he opened a boutique on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills in December, he encountered a window too large to effectively display any jewelry at all. So, he came up with another idea. "I decided to dedicate this window to the city full of stylists by inviting one stylist at a time to be 'Stylist of the Month,' with their name on the window," says Webster, adding that stylists can use whatever mannequins, clothing, or props they like. "My only request is that any jewelry used is Stephen Webster—the rest is up to them." In February, stylist Becks Welch set up an alabaster-colored mannequin in a Zac Posen gown above giant red balls. She topped the statue off in a red wig styled by hair stylist Pamela Neal, and positioned her holding a Stephen Webster pendant necklace to her eye like a magnifying glass. Even if you're driving, you can't help but look. "The results have been amazing," says Webster. "I don't think there is any other concept like it in the jewelry industry."

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At Ivanka Trump's Madison Avenue boutique, a space that recalls a French boudoir with black-and-white art deco rugs and wall treatments accented with bright yellow and pink furniture, the pieces that catch the eyes of passersby are meticulously planned. The store is set up like a stylish dressing room, a place where

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TIPS FROM FENG SHUI MASTERS

When working with retailers, visual merchandisers and interior designers often use the ancient Chinese art of feng shui. Here are five tips for creating a successful business environment:

- 1. Add water.** Water treatments, such as a fountain or a fish tank, positioned near the entrance or inside the boutique are thought to attract and retain wealth.
- 2. Incorporate metal.** A 20- to 50-pound metal sculpture in the eastern part of the space will repel negative energy.
- 3. Never block an entrance.** Anything that blocks the entrance, such as a column or a tree, can prevent people from wanting to enter the store and, hence, inhibit business.
- 4. Use natural materials.** Even if materials are man-made, natural-looking materials convey a warm and friendly environment.
- 5. Create feelings of openness.** Take out unnecessary walls or columns. Open up your space. Good feng shui is good interior design.

SOURCES: Ruth Møllergaard, Janice Sugita, and Gabrielle Levin



Ralph Lauren's fine jewelry salon in New York City



The fanciful window display at F.D. on East 65th Street

you want to have tea and play. CEO Andrea Hansen believes in arranging jewelry in tightly edited groups and then providing empty space to give the brain time to process what the eyes have seen. She looks for traffic patterns—where people go when they come in, whether they veer to the right or whether they stop to take a break—and then places the collection's attention-grabbers strategically. "In a magazine, you have 2.2 seconds to hold someone's attention," Hansen says. "In retail, it's the same thing. You stand to lose at every single moment. Each step forward is a victory. They're more willing to go deeper into your world."

The most practical way to map out traffic patterns and eye movements in your store, says Levine, is to hand out cameras to friends and employees. Ask them to walk throughout the store, photographing whatever catches their eye. The photos identify points of attraction and dead space, and map out the directions in which people move. They also allow you to see the store through varied perspectives.

Traffic and eye patterns are important, but if visual merchandising in the jewelry business comes down to one thing, it's lighting. "It's very expensive to do right, and doing it wrong can destroy an entire collection," Hansen says, noting that lighting missteps can make an environment too hot or too dry, which can actually destroy delicate materials such as pearls. In her wholesale business, she often visits retailers for the sole purpose of seeing what kind of lighting equipment they use. "Lighting is one of the factors of whether they will carry my collection or not," she says. "It's definitely at the top of my list."

Even small businesses like Williams Jewelers (with two locations in Denver and Englewood, Colo.) won't skimp on lighting fixtures. Co-owner Steven Williams has installed state-of-the-art LED lighting both in display cases and on the ceiling so that jewelry appears as brilliant in a customer's hand as it does on a shelf. "Otherwise, you're showing the diamonds in a closet," he says. After all is said and done, the best light around, of course, is natural light, and Williams will often send a customer outside to inspect a stone (accompanied, presumably, by a staff member).

So what improvements can you make today without spending a dime? Probably the simplest, most effective thing you can do right now is declutter your space. Even big-name designers like Webster admit to an urge to pile on merchandise and décor, but he concedes the store always looks better when his staff reins him in. Professional visual merchandisers advise their clients to walk around the store and ask themselves if each item they see is relevant to their business. If it isn't, get rid of it. "It has to be pristine," says Williams. "It's 101—a basic of the business. It's how you connect. I think our business would be a third less if our store was cluttered and dirty. But we run a tight, clean ship and our business is growing." ■